

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12.01am, WEDNESDAY 8 APRIL 2020

Migrant workers locked out from welfare left homeless and hungry

Thousands of migrant workers will be left destitute without immediate access to welfare payments during the COVID-19 crisis, warn legal organisations supporting vulnerable employees.

Parliament is scheduled to sit today to consider JobKeeper wage subsidy legislation that will support workers with income relief payments of \$1,500 per fortnight for six months; however, temporary visa holders are currently unable to access the scheme or other welfare benefits.

Responding to the proposed legislation, a joint letter from the Migrant Employment Legal Service (MELS), comprised of Redfern Legal Centre, Marrickville Legal Centre, Kingsford Legal Centre and Inner City Legal Centre raises concerns that the Government's response to COVID-19 will significantly disadvantage the migrant worker population.

"Migrant workers have been left in a state of crisis. Not only are they locked out from welfare, they are locked out of their home countries because borders have closed, or because they cannot access flights." Redfern Legal Centre solicitor and MELS steering committee member, Sharmilla Bargon said. "Unless the government acts now, countless essential workers will be left homeless and hungry, with no income, no social security safety net and nowhere else to go."

There is currently no government subsidy available to migrant workers who lose income during the coronavirus crisis. While the Government has recently announced temporary visa holders with work rights are able to access up to \$10,000 of their superannuation, this narrow measure doesn't go far enough in addressing the hardship faced by migrant workers who make up 1.1 million people in our workforce.

"Australia relies on migrant workers to care for our sick and to teach our children," Ms Bargon continued. "Migrant workers play an essential role at all levels of Australia's food supply chain, picking our fresh produce, cooking and preparing our meals, and delivering them to Australia's increasingly self-isolated population. We owe it to these essential workers to provide support."

The letter calls on the Australian Government to extend financial welfare support to those on temporary work visas to avoid leaving these critical members of our workforce behind during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RLC employment law solicitor Shamilla Bargon is available for interview. To arrange comment contact: Finn O'Keefe, Redfern Legal Centre Communications Manager: 0424 548 019. Email finn@rlc.org.au.